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EST provides realistic training in virtual environment

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE KALSU, Iraq - The Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 76th Field Artillery Regiment, have found themselves in an unfamiliar situation, as the need for infantryman increases.

The Engagement Skills Trainer 2000(EST 2000) immerses Soldiers into realistic scenarios in which they are forced to react and communicate as if they were facing dangers in combat.

In one scenario, the convoy takes them through a small village, known to provide sanctuary for insurgents. Despite intelligence reports that insurgents are known to cause diversions to stop convoys, the Soldiers still stop when they see a crowd of local citizens seeking medical attention for a woman in their midst.

Dismounting from the protection of the up-armored vehicles, five of the 4th brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Ga., Soldiers, along with an Iraqi policeman, walk toward the crowd to see what they can do.

The crowd shouts in Arabic, causing them to slowly raise their weapons higher from the low ready. Their Iraqi police counterpart does little to calm their nerves.

"The IP's making me nervous," one remarks, noting the man's inability to stand still and focus on the crowd, his constant need to look back to the Soldiers as if for reassurance.

The policeman's actions are understandable, and despite their nervousness; the Soldiers remain vigilant, relying on their previous training to guide their decisions. One Soldier remembers an obscure tidbit from Arabic culture training. While most of the crowd is waving with their right hands, one man off to the side of the crowd, dressed in olive drab fatigues and a white and black checkered headdress, is waving with his left hand, only offering a profile of his left side and concealing his right.

Remembering that the left hand is considered unclean and not used in interactions, the Soldier warns his counterparts. "Watch that guy," he shouts.

Seconds later, he calls out that he sees a weapon and raises his weapon to engage. The cries of the crowd are replaced by the click of trigger as one shot rings out.

"Defend your actions," flashes across the screen, taking them out of their patrol and back into the safety of the dark training room.

"People really get into it," said Steve Brockwell, EST operator. "It's good for NCOs to train their people on."

One noncommissioned officer taking advantage of the training is Sgt. 1st Class Chris LeMaire, gun truck platoon, platoon sergeant, Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1-76th Field Artillery Regiment.

"This is a newly formed gun truck platoon," he said, adding the battalion will soon be taking over responsibility of the area controlled by the 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, 3rd BCT, 3rd Inf. Div.

The EST 2000 unit is capable of a variety of tasks, including range training, weapon zeroing, weapon familiarization with all the weapons used by U.S. Forces, including mission scenarios and both, personnel weapons and crew-served weapons training, Brockwell said.

Although some Soldiers might not take the concept seriously at first, once engaged Soldiers quickly realize the system isn't just some over the top video game system.

"When you go down to the scenarios, we realize we can really do this for real," said Spc. Nick Geno, a fire direction specialist with HHB, 1-76 Field Artillery. "It's not playtime anymore."

By immersing Soldiers in a virtual reality environment, where actors portray specific roles, wearing realistic garb, speaking in Arabic and working in an environment that could have been lifted from Iraq, the experience is quite lifelike.

Adding to the realism are the weapons used by the Soldiers. Soldiers use their own weapons, which are fitted with a special device that allows them to shoot a laser to interact with the imagery on the screen. The weapon retains the recoil of a live round, said Brockwell, a native of Elgin, Okla.

Realism is also achieved altering scenarios as they are run through by the Soldiers, who train in five-man teams, said Sgt. 1st Class Raymond Linck, EST NCO in charge.

"We can bump up or down the severity at any time to keep them on their toes," he said. "They'll never know how the scenario will play out. It teaches situational awareness."

This feature prevents Soldiers who are watching from "cheating," Brockwell said. With the press of a button, scenarios can change in a flash, just like real combat. One squad's previous walk through a local market could be uneventful, while the next pass through could be full of insurgent forces.

Besides this alteration, scenarios can also be tailored to a unit's individual mission needs, said Linck, a native of Kansas City, Mo. Units more likely to patrol the roads can spend more time on convoy-based scenarios, while foot patrolling units can experience walking through towns, manning checkpoints or engaging locals in a market place.

"Being artillery filling in for an infantry role, we're not used to some of these missions," said LeMaire, a native of Marietta, Ga. "This training will help us be an efficient force."

"When we run through as a squad, it helps give us experience giving commands, working on our communication," added Geno, who said improving communication is key. "This is a good refresher."

Though the EST 2000 was originally installed to help refresh the skills of the 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st BCT, 3rd Inf. Division, recently transferred under operational authority of the 2nd BCT, Linck said any unit can come work on the training system.

"We are willing to work with any unit," he said, noting that his home unit, the 26 Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd BCT, 3rd Inf. Div., has used the machine extensively. "The whole BSB has been through, including the key leadership. They liked it a lot."

Even units and Soldiers who may never leave the base can get some good training out of the system. It can simulate weapon qualification ranges, allowing Soldiers to keep their shooting skills sharp without having to arrange for using a real range, getting ammunition, and providing the usual safety precautions, Brockwell said.

"If you don't fire right on the EST 2000, you won't on the range. Here you can work on muscle memory, see where every bullet goes," he said.

"It's best to hit it right before the range," Linck added, as it helps Soldiers familiarize themselves with their weapons and refresh their basic rifle marksmanship skills.

Besides these advantages, the training system also has a large advantage for the Army: decreasing the cost of training without decreasing the quality. "For five dollars of diesel you can run it for eight hours," Brockwell said.

In those eight hours, a Soldier can fire thousands of rounds. With live ammunition costing 28 cents a round, the savings really add up, Brockwell said, allowing the Army to spend more money on equipment to keep Soldiers safer and more comfortable.

Soldiers do not need to come as a unit. He said if a leader just wants to come down and train a Soldier on their weapon or a new weapon system, they can come by.

On average, it takes a five man team 45 minutes to run through each scenario, allowing Linck and Brockwell to accommodate up to 100 Soldiers a day.

"I think it will be very helpful for the FOB," Linck said of the training being offered.

Watching the improvement in his Soldiers as they defend in the convoy scenario and go onto another scenario, this time in a marketplace, LeMaire can't help but agree.

"What it does is it boosts the junior leadership," LeMaire said. "It gives me a chance to evaluate my guys."

The evaluations, like the targets, are shown instantly on the screen. Already a marked improvement can be seen in the percentage of lethal shots fired and reaction time of Soldiers between the time they first see a threat to the time they respond to it.

Even though the sights are virtual, the results are a reality LeMaire is glad to see. "I have a feeling that when they go outside the wire they'll have a lot of confidence."

Soldiers can contact the office by email at raymond.linck@2bct3id.army.mil or stephen.brockwell@2bct3id.army.mil. The office headquarters are at building H8A behind the Kalsu Mayor Cell. Linck has a dry erase board there Soldiers can leave messages at if no one is present at the office.

Hours of operation are from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., although Brockwell said they are willing to work around a unit's schedule.

Photo cutlines:



01 – A Soldier, designated firer #2, shoots a terrorist at the Engagement Skills Trainer 2000 on Forward Operating Base Kalsu during a scenario. The trainer helps Soldiers practice their Soldier skills in a realistic, virtual environment. Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1-76th Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Ga., used the trainer Feb. 1 to help prepare them for a more traditional infantry role. (Photo by Sgt. Kevin Stabinsky)



02 – A Soldier, designated firer #3, shoots a terrorist wielding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher at the Engagement Skills Trainer 2000 on Forward Operating Base Kalsu during a scenario. The trainer helps Soldiers practice their Soldier skills in a realistic, virtual environment. Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1-76th Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Ga., used the trainer Feb. 1 to help prepare them for a more traditional infantry role. (Photo by Sgt. Kevin Stabinsky)



03 – A screen displaying the shot count and amount of hits and misses greet Soldiers after completing a scenario on the Forward Operating Base Kalsu Engagement Skills Trainer 2000. Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1-76th Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Ga., used the trainer Feb. 1 to help prepare them for a more traditional infantry role. (Photo by Sgt. Kevin Stabinsky)



04 – The Engagement Skills Trainer 2000 on Forward Operating Base Kalsu stops during a scenario to allow Soldiers to explain why they took a shot before a terrorist did. The trainer helps Soldiers understand the Army's rules of engagement and practice them in a realistic, virtual environment. Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1-76th Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Ga., used the trainer Feb. 1 to help prepare them for a more traditional infantry role. (Photo by Sgt. Kevin Stabinsky)

For queries, contact the Multi-National Division – Center Public Affairs at MND-Center_PAO@iraq.centcom.mil or by phone at Commercial 912-767-3373 during the day and 912-767-4966 from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m.

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